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Cumulus Paris 2011 Conference

GIDE: The sustainable future of a group for international design education.

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GIDE, THE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF A GROUP FOR INTERNATIONAL DESIGN EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper describes the innovative work of GIDE, Group for International Design Education; a consortium of Interior/3D design institutions¹. GIDE exists to promote intercultural collaboration and exchange across education bringing ethical design issues into applied working practices, transforming curricula and promoting multidisciplinary experiences across the European Union and beyond.

To achieve this aim GIDE organises annual workshops, symposia, exhibitions and, crucially, research publications that describe diverse responses to shared project themes. GIDE, partially funded through the LLP/Erasmus programme, offers an alternative model to traditional Erasmus student exchange programmes. It argues that international collaboration at this level allows us to gain new perspectives for 'local problems' and to maintain solidarity through such collaboration.

We speculate on the sustainability of GIDE in the face of severe cuts and academic restructuring and argue that without such international, educator-led initiatives, design education will become vulnerable and unsustainable.

Keywords: GIDE, sustainability, internationalization, collaboration

¹ *Members include: Politecnico di Milano – School of Design (Italy), member of Cumulus; Leeds College of Art (UK), member of Cumulus; Lessius Mechelen University College (KHM), Mechelen (Belgium), member of Cumulus; Hochschule Magdeburg-Stendal Institut für Industrial Design (Germany); SUPSI Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana Dipartimento Ambiente Costruzioni e Design, Lugano (Switzerland); Academy of Design, Ljubljana (Slovenia); Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Design, Dundee (Scotland).*

Introduction

This paper describes the value of international partnerships in strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration and solidarity, enriching educational experiences and widening cultural horizons across international borders and invites delegates to debate its sustainability in a climate of economic and pedagogic change. We introduce GIDE (Group for International Design Education) as an innovative international student and teacher community.

Given the drivers affecting change - the blurring of traditional design boundaries; a need to generate external research funding; changes in student fees and an emphasis on industry-led design education - important questions are raised on how individual institutions compete in such a marketplace¹.

At a time when widening participation, internationalizing the curriculum, Bologna and moves by European interior design organizations to lay claim, define or 'confine' interiorsⁱⁱ, GIDE has been forging new interdisciplinary relationships that transform international Interior/3D design curricula. GIDE has pioneered this agenda since 1998 using workshops, projects, exhibitions and publicationsⁱⁱⁱ ([4] to develop values and skills that enables graduates to operate in diverse cultural environments; to become better global citizens with intercultural experiences and to enables graduate attributes of resilience and sensitivity – arguably, qualities that are required in a rapidly changing, complex global workforce.

The GIDE programme offers an alternative to the common method of dealing with incoming and outgoing exchange students, in that it provides an opportunity for many, rather than just a few - to meet and work together to meet common goals, raise awareness and develop new networks and contacts.

This paper stipulates that the mechanism for education might be money, but its power-source remains passionate Interior/3D educators who make things happen. It's *individuals* who sustain innovative communities. In this best practice it is mainly design educators who drive change. The question is "how valuable is the sustainability of an international educators group at a time when economic cuts are forcing change?"

We seek to raise debate on how GIDE operates at a time of exceptional change and uncertainty in education. Such challenges are significant in Europe as a whole. Already we see EU government economic policy threatening leading schools and their working conditions. We will explore how programmes such as GIDE, can play a part in a sustainable cooperative international future and we offer insights into the historical background, structure, programme, educational achievements and, its growing research potential.

GIDE background

Almost six months before the EU Ministers of Education signed the Bologna declaration in September 1998 and after some years of traditional Erasmus student and staff exchanges - of which delegates will be very familiar - three interior design schools² decided to develop a common design project ('*Day Nurseries*') – which depended on cultural exchange. An objective of the project was to allow the three partner schools to compare student responses from different nationalities. Academics noticed a lack of communication between the different student nationalities. In order to remedy this the organizers decided to instigate a team-working approach. Initiating a team approach allowed students and teaching staff to experience a more in-depth intercultural exchange and better reflected the spirit of the Bologna Declaration (1999): "*the promotion of*

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international exchanges, the possibility to compare skills, content and quality of the study programmes,[] to create a European common education space."

The launch of the project: "*Transit: Designs for new Airports*" in 2001 was also the launch of the GIDE consortium: *Group for International Design Education*. New partners were welcomed to the group and inspiring project themes embraced critical design issues affecting society such as '*Performance*' (2004/05), '*Books-The future of Reading*' (2005/06), '*The New Generation*' (2006/07), '*Hospitable City*' (2007/08), '*Sustainable Mobility*' (2008/09), '*Design for Innovative Communities*' (2009/2010) and '*Exhibit*' – presented in Germany in February 2011.

The yearly meetings lead to evaluation and evolution in operation and collaboration: the organization of yearly international weeks, lectures, joint exhibitions, the annual publication of the project research and results, the GIDE-website, a system of guest members and the participation to congresses that collectively evolved into a more comprehensive GIDE experience. Although emerging from three original Interior Schools, GIDE has continued to evolve and now includes a multidisciplinary partnership of interior design, product design, 3D-design, art & interdisciplinary practice, interior architecture and furniture design.

Whilst GIDE celebrates design diversity in its membership, (interior) design remains core to its origins and future direction.

How it works

Every academic year, a similar collaboration cycle (Figure 1.) is followed. The whole experience is divided into three parts: the '*Event*', the '*Launch*' and the '*Project*'. The '*Event*' (3 to 4 days) takes place each year in February and is hosted by a partner school. This partner also chooses a new theme for exploration. The '*Event*' includes an international workshop to explore the theme. International multidisciplinary groups of about 12 students, supervised by multidisciplinary staff (two or three) from different countries, work together toward common aims. On the final day the groups of students produce a presentation of their work. But it is the dynamics of social interaction between the participants which is the major objective and learning outcome.

The '*Launch*' is the second stage. At a GIDE meeting in October, members present their theoretical and contextual approach to the shared project theme, already considered in their own institutions.

The third phase in the GIDE experience is the '*International Project*'. Each school works individually with the freedom to adopt their own project schedule, intellectual approach and course organization. Usually students of the 3rd year BA are involved in the design project at this stage. Students work in (multidisciplinary) teams. The results of the projects form the basis for the selection of the final works for the exhibition – timed to coincide with the following year's '*Event*' in February.

During the GIDE project, also the Erasmus exchange also occurs (LLP-funding). The institutions don't only receive GIDE-partner Erasmus students but also from other international (Erasmus) partners. Because the interdisciplinary composition of the GIDE-group (bachelors in interior design, interior architecture, product design, furniture design,...) the student teams are not only international but also interdisciplinary. Crucially, as the project is running at the same time in each of the partner schools, individual students can opt to work on it at any one of the partner institutions, utilizing Erasmus funding.

The exhibition is a key element because it provides an opportunity for a truly international experience where staff and students can view and discuss their achievements. Each school chooses six student projects for the exhibition during the Event week in February and a panel of local professionals is invited to select a winning submission for each GIDE school and award a certificate on the opening night. The work, sometimes with models,

prototypes or videos, is primarily in banner format, helping to harmonize the exhibition, but still allowing for diverse interpretations to emerge. A further advantage of the banner is for peer learning to occur through comparison, discussion and engagement for the banners. What emerges here is a distinct 'design challenge' for some student teams in fitting their design responses into a uniform format.

Central to the GIDE partnership is the annual documentation of a selection of student work from each partner institution in the form of a book. This book includes theoretical papers expanding on the pedagogic processes and key social and contextual themes influencing each institution's approach.

Sustainable approach

The Brundtland Report (1987)^{iv} defines sustainable development as follows: *'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'*

This is a rather broad definition widely known as People, Planet and Profit^v but clearly sustainable development tries to find solutions for various contemporary problems, taking into account the interests of people, the environment and the economy. This three-part cornerstone is the basis for our sustainable international cooperation.

In this paper we focus on examples of sustainable cooperation on several levels and areas: students, teachers, course content, school management and the local community. We don't intend to give a complete and detailed overview of all sustainable aspects but we want to demonstrate with some examples of how a sustainable approach reflects different areas of the international cooperation in GIDE.

Designer skills and course content

Every year GIDE focuses on broad concepts and complex design values and ethics that are of key importance to the new generation of student designers. In the yearly search for social/cultural design topics, the GIDE partners always look for relevant topics, based on preliminary research, in which the "future" professional designer can play a significant role. It could be about the role of innovator affecting social/cultural issues, innovation in sustainable development or design innovation. For example students collaborating on the "Hospitable city" theme examined how "their cities" might become more hospitable, how to create hospitality for new genres of inhabitants, new social structures in the city, how to improve social contact and social dialogue and enhance the hospitality of wider social/cultural services and experiences.

Within the GIDE context there is a range of design briefs, each with varied educational approaches (interior design, product design, interior architecture, furniture design, 3D-design). The (interior) designer is always seen as a professional with specialist expertise, not only for the design of 'products' or 'spaces' - or the 'setting up' of interior and exterior environments, but s/he has the ability to imagine and design innovative spaces and services that make use of open, convertible, interim and sustainable systems. The design students are challenged to create sustainable visions of 'habitation' and 'usage'. They engage themselves to analyze, define and research various social and spatial paradigms. From a course content aspect, the inner purpose of GIDE projects is to shape materials and develop conceptual 'containers' with attention for *'People and Planet'*.

One could say that this investigation of social/cultural design dimensions of design reflects a school of thought that takes the design role in society seriously, but few approach this through an international format, as operated by GIDE. The multidisciplinary- multicultural teams of students create further added value.

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The interdisciplinary nature of the mixed teams helps to ensure a more holistic experience, forcing the interior designer to work with 3D design, product design, furniture design or interdisciplinary students, for example, from other GIDE partners⁸, affording a more 'inclusive' vision of the project. Clearly, there are different competences and skills related to different design professions brought together. But also the different cultural and traditional background (also educational tradition) of the international students provokes individuals to take into account other viewpoints and offers better potential for innovative ideas.

The international factor reflects the internationally orientated world we're living in. Students in the home institution who can't go or don't want to go on an exchange or participate in the Event, do have an international experience due to the GIDE project. The approach of international teamwork within their own college or university creates internationalization@home, a form of internationalization without mobility in the strict sense of the word. Students experience international cooperation without leaving the school building. Students' intercultural and interdisciplinary cooperative skills are developed and their creative skills are positively influenced^{vi}.

Furthermore, this kind of teamwork simulates future working conditions of the designer. It reflects for students a daily working environment: designers can't but cooperate with engineers, cabinet makers, graphic designers, architects and other stakeholders. Many design offices employ co-operators trained in different disciplines.

Student approach

From the "People" point of view, sustainable student mobility presupposes socio-cultural responsibility. The intention is that the student exchange must bring about an interaction between the student and the context in which he is operating; sustainable student exchange should be enriching for both parties.

Sustainable design in educational programmes should be more than the conscious and responsible choice of (green) materials. Besides that we demand innovative design, the added value and relevance of the space or product to be designed should be constantly questioned. How is the context perceived? What are the expectations and needs of the user? What is the relevance of the idea? Moreover, a design assignment is always related to a specific socio-cultural context. The designer's role and the entire awareness process is of critical importance, as it is during an international exchange.

When the course takes intercultural or international elements into account, an internationalizing dimension is established. The objective is to give students a better understanding of global and multicultural society, also for those who are not lucky enough to participate in an (Erasmus) exchange. These objectives can be incorporated within the course subjects, but can also be realized by organizing international projects at home and hereby offers an answer to the 'Profit' question. The organization of teamwork during an international project, with teams including foreign students, is a form of internationalization@home which enhances the cultural exchange of knowledge, values, techniques and methods. Digital learning platforms can also offer a wide range of opportunities to give shape to (virtual) internationalization. In 2010, GIDE created a website. The aim is to evolve towards a digital international learning platform to exchange and share ideas, research results, theoretical background information and design results between teachers and students, however, all this is still in its infancy.

The 'ideal' exchange student makes time for in-depth exploration. S/he learns at least a few sentences in the language of the host country. This is a way to open doors and show interest and respect to the hosting culture. The contact with the local population could also be enriching. Wonder at the little things of daily life can lead to a better understanding and

respect for the host culture. It might be better to explore a particular region thoroughly than to visit as many cities as possible, as typical tourists do. This also includes getting to know the localized field of study: learning about the day-to-day reality of fellow students, besides the didactic vision and approach of the hosting institution. There is also an interesting and sometimes funny side, involving acquaintance with local taboos and customs. The do's and don'ts of the guest culture. The university or school can play an important role in broadening students' awareness and acceptance. Discussing socio-cultural elements during assignments and course subjects can help but certainly the participation in the annual Event also supports this 'People' aspect of sustainability^{vii}.

Teacher approach

Theoretical lectures from a wide range of professors and professionals support the theoretical underpinning and cultural diversity of the shared project theme. During the academic year and during the Event, teachers, researchers and coordinators communicate and work together on the design topic. By adapting the main topic to the specific cultural and educational context of each school, the teachers and coordinators are also obliged to work in international teams, providing intellectual space to generate a singular process of learning and teaching that goes far beyond linguistic or cultural frontiers. Lecturers learn from one another by listening to the experiences and anecdotes of their peers. One can conclude that this is a free way of training the trainer^{viii}.

By embedding the international semester within the GIDE project in the curricula, teachers and project coordinators have created a sustainable cooperation and internationalization. The power-source is passionate and dedicated educators.

Managerial approach

Previous and parallel didactic experience of most of the partners, in a European and international context, helped to establish an innovative and self-financed model of cooperation for GIDE. Student and teacher exchange and preparatory visits are partly funded by the Erasmus LLP programme.

Sustainable mobility from the Profit-standpoint refers to lasting, stable and sound internationalization. We can pose the question whether GIDE's internationalization approach is dependent on, or formally integrated within an educational institution. This can occur on different levels. On the weakest level internationalization depends on a few individuals, e.g. the commitment of a single student who wants to establish a work placement in a developing country, who is looking for the contacts himself and organizes his stay independently. Most of the institutions offer a more systemized student mobility. Ideally speaking, internationalization is adopted in the mission and core activities of the university or school. Sustainable student mobility implies a solid basis: lecturers and students as well as school management must endorse its importance. The realization of an international network, such as GIDE, if supported by school management, is a basis for continuous student mobility.

Soundness in sustainable internationalization refers to quality control and care. School policy guidelines should include quality indicators^{ix}. The quality of the student and teacher mobility cycle should be systematically evaluated. After failure detection, actions for improvement are identified and acted on. The approach should be innovative and future oriented. Institutions should aim at excellence and international recognition because of their international expertise. Such expertise can lead to the sharing of knowledge and international benchmarking.

Due to the close cooperation within GIDE, a quality control system became established. During the coordinators' meetings (at least twice a year) the quality of cooperation, communication, events and, student and teachers' work, is discussed. Didactic and managerial approaches are compared. All schools are motivated to improve the quality of all aspects. This is customary since we are all operating in the same pool; we are all

together in an exhibition at the end of the project and all students' work is presented in the annual publication. Teachers and coordinators learn from their international peers. For school management it is an ideal and sustainable bench marking tool.

Conclusions and discussion

GIDE is considered as a dynamic and sustainable collaborative framework which enhances the sustainable development of interior/3D design education and future thinking. Although there are many advantages to an international interdisciplinary cooperative, there is also a down side. International projects and the organization of international weeks like the "Event" are expensive, especially when funding is only accomplished by Erasmus LLP. Also further development of e.g. the digital learning platform demands financial support. So far, the GIDE approach didn't fit into any funding programmes. Some programme restrictions would severely compromise didactical or organizational features. Some past GIDE projects lead to intense cooperation with local organizations or government (e.g. Hospitable cities, Performance ...) and resulted in elegant publications or free use of space for exhibitions but never to financial support. Our next project "Design for Local Industry" might embrace issues of state funding and local industry collaboration. Further development of cooperation models and the search for research funding could increase our competitiveness.

Besides the financial effects on a macro level, there are the economic consequences for the students. Student exchange or the participation in international events, always has a price. Not only students from developing countries find it difficult to afford an exchange experience, Erasmus grants or other allowances are also often inadequate. Democratization of internationalization remains an aspiration rather than a fact.

The actual level of success has been achieved largely through the dedicated effort of a small, committed team who have nurtured its development and ardently postulated its educational value. However, the devotion and cooperation of a small team is also a weakness. On the one hand, the teachers and course coordinators -lead group experience a good measure of freedom in realizing their "project" every year. On the other hand, can the quasi non-involvement of school management create a vacuum of non-understanding the value for all stakeholders? Indeed the yearly Event creates a lot of publicity and commotion and is a fortuitous PR-happening for the school, but this event occurs only once every seven years in one of the schools (since every school takes turn). A deeper involvement by school management could create a better understanding of the importance of international cooperation in a time of economic uncertainty. Further quantitative and qualitative research of the influence of this kind of international cooperation on students and teachers will more legitimize the efforts of teachers and coordinators.

The small team exposes several disadvantages: when a GIDE partner loses their international coordinator by way of redundancy or retirement, a vacuum can occur. If there is no-one to take responsibility for GIDE cooperation, collaboration can stagnate or totally disappear and the school will no longer be able to participate in the activities of the GIDE group.

Looking at student and teacher mobility through sustainability glasses is a complex matter. We described a number of focal points from a socio-cultural, ecological and economic viewpoint. All of these are inter-connected: social-cultural actions, attitudes and opinions have ecological or economic effects and vice versa. The examples in this paper are far from exhaustive and require further investigation.

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Learning to deal with diversity and intercultural dialogue has become an increasing necessity across all sectors of education. Academic cooperation on the level of the programmes and student and staff mobility ameliorates professional competence and enhances students' employment prospects. The course curriculum is seen in a broader international and intercultural context which improves the competitiveness and attractiveness of partner schools' programmes.

The operational management of the GIDE programme has consistently worked on improvement and the achievement of its objectives. But it might be argued that the future direction of the group has still to be further explored. The approach seems to be attractive to other higher institutions and this has created the question of participation of other schools and universities. This raised the extensive debate on the ideal size of the group and its consequences on management, costs and logistics. The resolution determined that we should not exceed eight partners in total – all in different countries. The forthcoming ten-year anniversary will create the opportunity for further reflection, to identify future objectives and goals.

Realization of the international dimension in education, research and community service is a fundamental task of each educational organization. Internationalization is indeed one of the foundations of informed higher education strategy and research (HeA³ / CEBE⁴) and is a recurring research theme in the areas of Engineering, Product and Industrial design (e.g. E&PDE⁵) and Art, Design and Media conferences (Cumulus⁶). The GIDE approach goes beyond traditional Erasmus student experiences. By establishing interconnected design themes and projects, striving for 'world citizenship', sharing cultural identity, young people are helped to be prepared for professional practice in a global market. We encourage students to consider themselves as global citizens with an eye for universal issues and respect for other cultures.

The specific didactic approach and embedding of the collaboration cycle within the course programmes has undoubtedly helped to prolong the survival of GIDE. Because sustainable internationalization comprises so many facets, we should strive for it but we should also recognize that it can never be fully realized. It is better to speak of sustainable *development* of internationalization.

We invite and welcome members of 'Cumulus' to draw on their wide range of knowledge and experience, to debate these issues.

³ HeA, Higher Education Academy

⁴ CEBE, the Centre for Education in the Built Environment includes case studies on internationalization at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/cebe/themes/internationalisation>

⁵ E&PDE 2006 "Educating Designers in a Global Context?" will ask how design educators should react to this change and in particular what should be the balance between global and local responses and reflecting how advantage can be taken of new opportunities for collaboration and global working

⁶ <http://www.cumulusassociation.org/>

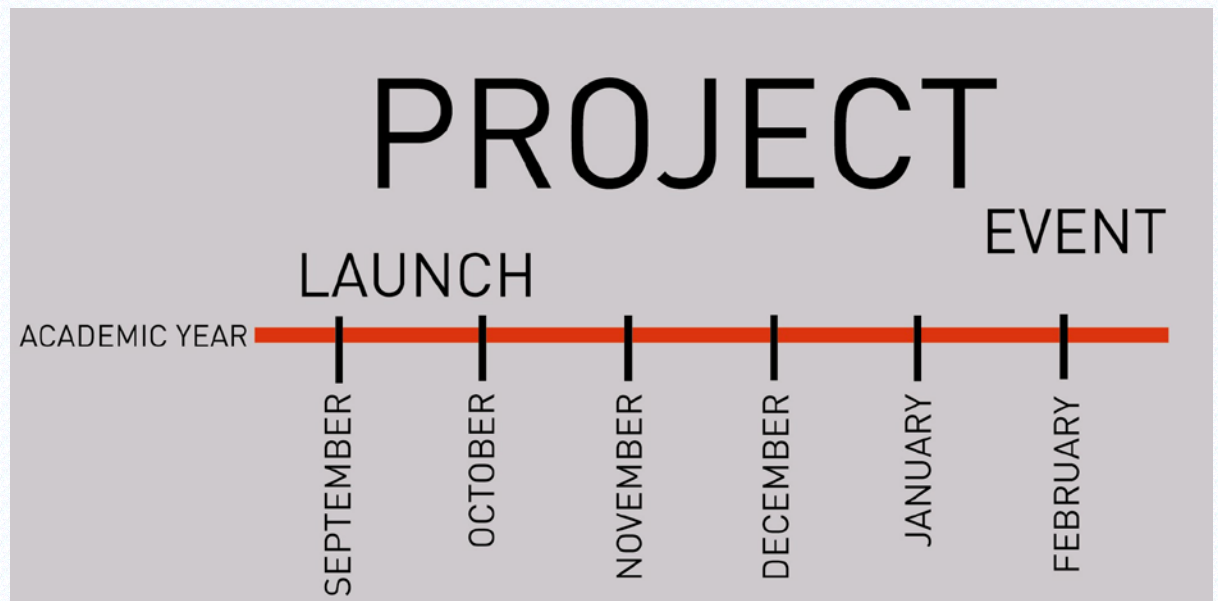


Figure 1. GIDE collaboration cycle

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